

Standard USHC-9: The student will demonstrate an understanding of the social, economic, and political events that impacted the United States during the Cold War era.

USHC-9.3 Summarize the key events and effects of the Vietnam War, including the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution and the Tet offensive; the protests and opposition to the war; and the policies of presidents John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, and Richard Nixon. (H, P, G)

Taxonomy Level: 2.2-B Understand / Conceptual Knowledge

Previous and future knowledge:

In 5th grade, students were introduced to the course of the Cold War, including the Vietnam War (5-5.1).

In Global Studies, students summarized the worldwide effects of the Cold War, including the competition for power between the United States and the Soviet Union, the changing relationships between the Soviet Union and China (GS-6.2) which should lay the basis for Nixon's strategy. They compared the challenges and successes of the movements toward independence and democratic reform in various regions following World War II, including the role of political ideology, religion, and ethnicity in shaping governments and the course of independence and democratic movements in Africa, Asia, and Latin America (GS-6.3) which should have included some discussion of the nationalist movement in Vietnam.

It is essential for students to know

Students should understand that Cold War fears caused the United States to become mired in a war in **Vietnam**. After World War II, the French attempted to restore their control of Southeast Asia. However, they met with resistance from the nationalist forces, the Viet Minh, under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh. The Truman and Eisenhower administrations aided the French with arms and money until the French were defeated. The French and Viet Minh reached a peace agreement, the Geneva Accords, which provided that Vietnam would be divided at the 17th parallel until elections could be held.

Claiming that the followers of Ho Chi Minh were communists directed from Moscow and Beijing and citing the domino theory, the Eisenhower administration backed the unpopular and corrupt government in South Vietnam. The South Vietnamese government refused to hold the elections called for in the Geneva Accords because Ho Chi Minh would have won. The Viet Cong were formed as a resistance movement to the South Vietnamese government. The United States supplied military aid and military advisers to the government of South Vietnam. North Vietnam supplied support to the Viet Cong.

President **Kennedy** increased the number of military advisers sent to help the South Vietnamese government. The US-supported strategic hamlet program further eroded public support for the South Vietnamese government. Kennedy approved of a CIA-supported coup to overthrow the corrupt president of South Vietnam, who was assassinated. Kennedy may have intended to withdraw from Vietnam, but was himself assassinated.

President **Johnson** took office in November 1963 and continued the policies of Kennedy. In 1964, the Gulf of Tonkin Incident led Congress to pass the **Gulf of Tonkin Resolution** which authorized the build-up of American troops to help the South Vietnamese. War, however, was never declared. Later, the Tonkin Gulf incident was shown to have been exaggerated. By 1967, there were 500,000 American troops in Vietnam. Johnson initiated Operation Rolling Thunder, a bombing campaign against North Vietnam, and a **protest movement** grew. The draft was seen as unfair because some were granted medical exemptions and college deferments or enlisted in the National Guard to avoid going to Vietnam. African Americans served in large numbers as ground troops. Like the Civil War in the South, the Vietnam War was seen as a "poor man's fight." Organizations which had formed in response to McCarthyism and the civil rights movement, such as Students for a Democratic Society and the Free

Speech movement, turned their attention to the war. Some returning soldiers joined the protest as Vietnam Veterans Against the War. Protesters used tactics of the civil rights movement, staging a march on Washington. As their protests became more provocative, including the burning of draft cards, protesters lost public support. Television coverage of the war and the protests divided the nation into hawks and doves. In January of 1968, media coverage of the **Tet Offensive** showed that the Viet Cong forces could attack anywhere and anytime, thus leading to a shift in public opinion against the war. Public opposition and a split within the Democratic Party over the war led Lyndon Johnson to withdraw his name from consideration for the nomination in 1968 and begin negotiations to end the conflict.

Richard **Nixon** was elected president in November of 1968 because voters understood that he would end the war. Instead, he began a policy of Vietnamization and, at the same time, he escalated the war effort, causing the protest movement to intensify. A secret, massive bombing campaign was extended to Laos and Cambodia. Protests continued with a massive march in Washington. The Nixon administration ended the draft and initiated a lottery system, which somewhat calmed the protest movement. American forces invaded Cambodia to close the Ho Chi Minh trail. Resulting protests led to the Kent State Massacre. Nixon opened a dialogue with China in hopes of undermining Chinese support for the North Vietnamese. The Nixon administration finally reached an agreement with North Vietnam on the eve of the 1972 elections. American forces were withdrawn and American POWs returned home in 1973. In 1975, Saigon fell to the North Vietnamese and the war was over. The containment policy had failed in Southeast Asia.

It is important for students to understand that Vietnam is bigger than the failed war effort and the loss of 58,000 American soldiers. It was a cultural phenomenon that called into question American values in the My Lai Massacre, the use of Agent Orange and napalm, ‘fragging’ and heavy use of drugs among the troops, and the mistreatment of returning veterans. It led to distrust between generations and between the people and their government, as evidence of false information was confirmed by the release of *The Pentagon Papers* and increased the ‘credibility gap.’ Ultimately, it was the controversy over Vietnam that led the Nixon administration to employ the ‘plumbers’ and authorize the break-in into the Watergate offices of the Democratic Party. The break-in led to the Watergate scandal, impeachment hearings and Nixon’s resignation. Vietnam affected government power and foreign policy. The Congress took action to curb the President’s war-making powers with the passage of the War Powers Act. The ‘Vietnam syndrome,’ fear of becoming mired in a prolonged unpopular war, affected United States’ foreign policy. Students should also understand the consequences of the Vietnam conflict for southeast Asia, such as the imprisonment and ‘re-education’ of many South Vietnamese, which led to an exodus of boat people, and the civil war and massacre in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge.

It is not essential for students to know:

Students do not need to remember details such as that Dien Bien Phu was the site of the French defeat in 1954. Students do not need to know the names of government leaders of either North or South Vietnam nor military terms such as DMZ or the names of bases. They do not need to remember the names of American generals or of the secretaries of State or Defense. Although students should understand that there was opposition to the war within the government and within the Democratic Party they do not need to know the specific roles of George Ball, Eugene McCarthy, or Bobby Kennedy. They do not need to know the circumstances of the release of the Pentagon Papers including the role of Daniel Ellsberg, the Supreme Court case of *Nixon v The New York Times* or the details of the Watergate scandal.

Assessment guidelines:

Appropriate assessments will require students to **explain** the key events and effects of the Vietnam War. Students should be able to **summarize** the Vietnam policy of Presidents Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon, and **compare** these policies to one another. They should be able to **classify** policies and give **examples** of policies for each presidential administration. Students should be able to **interpret** maps, graphs and

political cartoons and **infer** their relationship to information about the time period. They should be able to **interpret** the significance of key events and presidential policies on support for the war effort and **infer** the war's impact on the American government and future policies towards foreign intervention.

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